Ernst Josephson: Painting Poet and Poetic Painter

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Alexander Roslin (1718–1793), *The Artist and his Wife Marie Suzanne Giroust Portraying Henrik Wilhelm Peill*, 1767. Oil on canvas, 131 x 98.5 cm. Donated by the Friends of the Nationalmuseum, Sophia Giesecke Fund, Axel Hirsch Fund and Mr Stefan Persson and Mrs Denise Persson. Nationalmuseum, NM 7141.

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The Nationalmuseum’s Artists Archive has received as a gift some thirty documents originating from Ernst Josephson (1851–1906), mostly letters and poems from different periods in the artist’s life. A few fragments of this material are presented below.

Josephson grew up in a Jewish family in Stockholm and became active in the circle of artists who, in the 1880s, made clear their opposition to the prevailing academic norm. A contemporary witness recounts how he spoke at an art exhibition in Copenhagen in 1883: "I cannot remember a word of what he said, I just remember the youth, the passion, the fever, the bright optimism and the rhetorical splendour of his speech, which filled the room with wonder and atmosphere and drove a wave of heat through the hearts of his listeners." Josephson’s success was fragile, however, and his career would be split into two periods, before and after his mental breakdown in 1888.

In 1887, following a series of setbacks, Josephson had taken refuge on the Île de Bréhat on the north coast of Brittany. During his stay there he took part in spiritualist experiments, and in 1888 he produced a series of notes and images with features of “automatic” writing. In this “spiritual protocol”, Josephson has dealings with spirits of various kinds, including that of the mystic Emanuel Swedenborg. On 10 July 1888, he wrote to his sisters:

Fig. 1 “Dear Sisters”, letter by Ernst Josephson, 1888. Nationalmuseum Archives.
I am much changed since I last wrote to you. A deep and solid piety has seized hold of me ... I have received the most wonderful revelations through Swedenborg [sic], through the art of drawing as well as through the art of writing and the organ of hearing. Indeed, I can even sense the spirits' presence through the peculiar odour. And I have been visited by all kinds of people, from the greatest to the lowest, by both kings and moneylenders, and through all this God has, in a simple and powerful way, sought to proclaim to me his will, and the meaning of my task in life.'

A few days after this letter came the collapse that brought Josephson back to Stockholm. His condition deteriorated, and after walking, in great confusion, the many tens of miles to Uppsala, he was admitted to the city's mental hospital. From there, Josephson wrote to his sisters (Fig. 1):

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I thank you for the shameless way in which you have thrown me into a lunatic asylum, pretending that I am mad, because you surely don't expect me to imagine that you believe me to be mad. It is, I admit, a good way of getting rid of someone. But the three gentlemen who perpetrated this outrage of forcibly throwing a peaceable wanderer into prison — for a madhouse is a prison, and a dreadful one at that for someone who is sane — will soon no doubt get a taste of the policemen's whip, if there is any law and justice at all in this country ...
He concludes:

*I thank you for the parcels and odds and ends – I spend my time drawing figures and walking around whistling, and take the whole thing calmly – thinking about my old proposition that the sane are locked up – and the mad walk free.*

After his time in hospital, Josephson returned in 1889 to Stockholm, where he was looked after at home. In February 1888, unsure of his future as a visual artist, he had asked the writer Gustaf af Geijerstam for help in getting his poems published. In the autumn of the same year, *Svarta rosor* (Black Roses) was issued by the Bonniers publishing house. By the time a new selection of poetry entitled *Gula rosor* (Yellow Roses) appeared in 1896, Josephson’s art had been shown at a retrospective exhibition in 1893 and his artistic creativity had entered a new, productive phase. When *Svarta rosor och gula* (Roses Black and Yellow) was published in 1901, in a luxury edition with a cover design by the artist Nils Kreuger, Josephson was acknowledged as a trailblazer in both visual and verbal art.

Josephson’s visual art came very much to reflect the introspective approach of a younger generation, and yet does not have the same obviously biographical character as his verbal art. There are, though, clear links between the figures in his poems and the subjects of some of his portraits. Josephson’s own childhood resurfaces in the song cycle “To Little Gelly when She Lay Ill”, dedicated to the daughter of the artist’s deceased favourite sister Gelly. It was for her, too, that he wrote the poem “Tale of an Elf and a Snail”, in which the elf’s “bluish belt” is contrasted with the snail, which has attached its dwelling to the “mossy rock” by the rushing water (Fig. 2). To his sister Hilma he dedicated a childhood memory in sonnet form (Fig. 3). This poem introduces the “paper-doll musician”, a symbolic figure that would recur in Josephson’s pictorial world, including as the Water Sprite and the crucified Christ. And for his nephew Carl he composed an unrhymed
fairy tale in which Carl, in a dream, makes the following reflection: “How often does it not happen to us in this world that, though we faithfully remain inside the gate, our dreams take us beyond the stars!”

Several poems testify to Josephson’s love of folk song and his reading of different poets. During a visit to Norway in 1872, he wrote a nature poem whose first stanza runs (Fig. 4):

St John’s Eve, floral feast of the North, Lightest of light nights, When waterfalls roar from the fell, And in the valley fiddles and dancing cast their spell.

The contrast motif of the final stanza recalls Josephson’s painting The Water Sprite (1884), in which a dipper—a bird associated with streams and waterfalls—leans out over the edge of the rock:

The closed eye finally grasps Some flowers, godparents of dreams, And a snow-white butterfly flutters Over the depths of the abyss—Good night!

The musical quality of “St John’s Eve” recurs in several other poems, including the lullaby-like “To the Newborn Child” and the musical manuscript Festive Cantata with a Prayer, to be sung at the 90th birthday celebration of Mrs Hanna Marcus (née Schlesinger), with words and music by Josephson. Josephson’s poems have also attracted the interest of several composers, and among the material given to the Nationalmuseum is Henry Marcus’s setting of the title poem “Black Roses”, published as sheet music in 1907. The first stanza reads:

Tell me, why are you so sad today, You who are always so merry and gay? No, I am no more sad today Than when I seemed to you merry and gay; For grief has roses black as night.

The gift now received further enriches the Nationalmuseum’s already extensive document of Ernst Josephson’s artistic career. Several of the texts have previously been published, but the original material, in the artist’s shifting handwriting, brings us closer to the biographical context so essential to an interpretation of his art.

Notes:

1. Nationalmuseum Archives, Ernst Josephson, Biographica, Ej6. The material includes certain documents not in Josephson’s own hand, among them the poem “At Fredric Marcus’s grave, from a friend of his youth” and a list of material borrowed by the Josephson scholar Erik Blomberg from the estate of Josephson’s niece Gelly Marcus.

2. Karl Wåhlin, Ernst Josephson: en minnesteckning, d. 2, 1879–1906, Stockholm 1912, Sveriges allmänna konstförenings publikation, p. 85. Wåhlin later worked as an art critic and editor, and in 1890 was appointed to the staff of the Nationalmuseum. His encounter with Josephson in 1885 decisively shaped his approach as a critic. Wåhlin was also the author of the first major monograph on Josephson.

3. Josephson’s “Spiritual Protocol” (Andeprotokollen), which is included in the Nationalmuseum’s drawings collection, was published in 1988 under the title Vid himmelrikets portar: andeprotokollen från Bréhat sommaren 1888 (At the Gates of Heaven: The Spiritual Protocol from Bréhat, Summer 1888), with a foreword by Peter Cornell. The connection between art and occultism was a phenomenon typical of this period, and Josephson can be described as one of the pioneers of automation.

4. “Moneylenders” is Josephson’s term for his fellow Jews.


6. Gula rosor was published in parallel editions, in 1893, by Jacob Dybwads Forlag in Kristiania and the Stockholm publishers Wahlström & Widstrand. A fly in the ointment of Josephson’s comeback as a visual artist was the Nationalmuseum’s decision to decline The Water Sprite (Prins Eugens Waldemarsudde), which it had been offered by Prince Eugen.

7. The combined volume was published by Gernandits förlag.

8. The poem was published in Gula rosor. From 1865 to 1868, Gelly Josephson was married to Fredric Marcus. After her death in childbirth, Marcus married her sister Hilma. The younger Gelly Marcus is portrayed by Josephson in Girl in Blue (1883, Nationalmuseum, NM 3121).

9. This poem appeared in Gula rosor with the title “The Elf and the Snail”.

10. Published in Svarta rosor (Stockholm, 1888), under the heading “Two Sonnets”, and later in Svarta rosor och gula as “Christmas Eve”. Hilma Marcus, née Josephson, is portrayed by Josephson in Mrs Hilma Marcus (1885, Nationalmuseum, NM 1871).


12. Hilma Marcus’s son Carl is portrayed by Josephson in Boy with a Wheelbarrow (1892, Nationalmuseum, NM 2144).

13. The poem was published in Gula rosor as “St John’s Eve”. In the material presented to the Nationalmuseum, it is titled simply: “To Fredrik and Hilma on their wedding day [or anniversary]”. Fredrik Marcus was Ernst Josephson’s brother-in-law, Hilma his sister. Blomberg 1945, pp. 19 f.

14. The poem “To the Newborn Child” was published in Gula rosor. Hanna Marcus is portrayed in Josephson’s painting Mrs Hanna Marcus (1880, Nationalmuseum, NM 3120). Josephson wrote several musical compositions of his own. An example of his boundary-crossing creativity is the verse drama Peter Smed, which was intended as an opera libretto. One part of it was published in Karl Wåhlin’s journal Ord & Bild in 1893, another in Gula rosor.

15. The poem was also set to music by Jean Sibelius and Frederick Delius. Other composers drawn to Josephson’s lyric poetry include Hugo Alfvén, Emil Sjögren and Ture Rangström.

16. See, for example, Nationalmuseum Archives, Ernst Josephson, Biographica, 1–5.